Developing and Leading the Quality Enhancement Planning Committee

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Quality enhancement in higher education is rapidly emerging as a major national and international issue. Rahman (2005) identifies an international movement to promote quality enhancement through “accreditation councils, degree program standardization, quality enhancement cells, quality faculty, and curriculum review.” According to Rahman, the movement is intended to develop “a vision for the higher education system with quality, equity, and efficiency.” Rahman also points out that the United States faces the need to evaluate the validity and quality of accreditation processes in light of the increase in dot-com universities and diploma mills. El-Khawas (1998) indicates that world-wide attention has shifted to an expanded focus on quality improvement in both undergraduate and graduate level programs. In the United States federal and state funding have become the rewards for attainment of recognized accreditations. In 1998, the Commission on Higher Education (CHE) shifted the oversight of the reporting process to programmatic, national, and regional accrediting agencies.

Regional accreditation has long constituted a major benchmark for determining institutional quality. Such is certainly the case in today’s savvy global and technological world with consumers of higher education facing myriads of educational offerings ranging from bogus to exceptional. The demands associated with a rapidly changing global society are challenging even the most eminent institutions of higher education as they struggle to deliver a relevant educational product. According to O’Banion (1997), “accrediting agencies are charged with determining the reputable from non-reputable institution and focus on learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.” Rather than yield to a philosophy of “let the buyer beware;” regional accreditation agencies have broadly implemented standards to maintain and systematically improve educational quality. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is no exception to this rule.

The Regional Perspective

In 2002, SACS adopted The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement as a means of upgrading expectations for member institutions and aligning them with the CHE. The 2008 standards consist of four sections including the Principle of Integrity, Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Guidelines. Each section delineates subsequent expectations regarding institutional performance. Core Requirement 2.12 requires a member institution to develop and implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) which includes the improvement in a self-identified aspect of student learning outcomes and places the following expectation upon member institutions.

The institution has developed an acceptable quality enhancement plan (QEP) that includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and ultimately completion of the QEP, includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and lastly identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement (SACS, 2008, p. 19).
The clear expectations of Core Requirement 2.12 relate directly to the broad-based planned improvement of student learning on an institutional basis. The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement provides additional input into the QEP process prior to actually stating Core Requirement 2.12. In what could be deemed a preamble to the QEP, the following narrative emphasizes institutional expectations.

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), submitted four to six weeks in advance of the on-site review by the Commission, is a document developed by the institution that includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and lastly identifies a goal and a plan to assess their achievement. The QEP should be focused and succinct (no more than seventy-five pages of narrative text and twenty-five pages of supporting documentation or charts, graphs, and tables) (SACS, 2008, p.7).

Many practitioners view compliance with the associated challenges of the QEP process as an institutional test to determine the ability of the institution to demonstrate both understanding and mastery of accepted higher education practice. Without a doubt, examination of the methodology by which the QEP is approached, designed, and implemented has maintained more than equal footing with the interpretation of the impact of the QEP within recent reaffirmation practices. Reflections regarding every aspect of the QEP process are of merit in guiding institutional practices which improve success in the pursuit of reaffirmation. This paper will specifically focus on the development and leadership of the QEP Committee.

The Texas Perspective

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education recently published a report on national performance in higher education (Measuring Up, 2008). This report rated Texas “Higher Education” against performance levels of the remaining states. Texas received a grade of B in preparation of high-school students, a grade of C in participation of young adults, an F in affordability of higher education, another C in higher education completion rates, and lastly a B in the economic benefits accrued from educating the population. The report noted that Texas possessed inadequate data to make meaningful state comparisons in the category of student learning, thus awarding the state an incomplete in this area. The learning model included the subcategories of literacy levels of the state’s residents, graduates ready for advanced practice, and the performance of college graduates.

Ignoring the incomplete grade in the latter category, the cumulative GPA for Texas translates to a 2.00. The study further admonishes Texas’ leaders towards a sense of urgency concerning the improvement of the state’s higher education system. The QEP holds the potential to restructure an institution’s ability to prepare the populace for participation in a global, knowledge-based economy. Again, the direction and leadership of the QEP process remains critical to the implementation of intended transformation.

The Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC) QEP Committee

While every member institution within SACS remains free to design and implement a unique vision and process, careful selection and development of the QEP committee constitutes the an essential
ingredient for addressing broad-based participation and buy-in fundamental to guiding meaningful change. Committee accountability generally falls under the direction of the chief academic or chief executive officer. TAMUC structured the QEP committee under the direction of the Provost along with direct interaction from the President. Thus the leadership’s methodological design blended participation and administration to enhance broad-based buy-in while providing the resources which enabled the process to come into fruition.

Committee selection began with the recruitment of two committee co-chairs founded upon the perception of solid academic citizenship as evidenced by their positive outlook, enthusiasm, knowledge of the accreditation process, and teaming skills. The co-chairs consulted with the administration to guide the selection of an eleven member committee broadly representative of the university as a whole, while also including student service personnel. Committee selection criteria utilized similar standards with an additional emphasis upon perceived respect and legitimacy within the institution. While broad-based inclusion remained the major goal, the task of the QEP committee was to create a vision for student learning appropriate to the culture and history of the institution.

An invitation from the Provost officially invited committee members to serve. Annual service letters provided documentation for both sufficient faculty rank and tenure review. Committee membership provided additional professional development resources to pursue a broader knowledge of the SACS reaffirmation process and a further understanding of the QEP rationale and methodology. Committee co-chairs were provided instructional release time when requested and sufficient resources to guide the QEP process. Co-chair resources also included access to clerical.

Contrary to some perceptions, great committees are not born. Great committees are grown and empowered. The TAMUC QEP committee constituted no exception. From inception, the primary goal entailed the growth and empowerment of a QEP Committee capable of enhancing instructional viability and student performance. An administrative emphasis was placed on the development of the QEP committee and provided pro-active rather than reactive leadership to formulate a deliberate course of action. The QEP committee transitioned through three major stages from initial organization to active practice. The major developmental stages were storming, forming, and norming. Discussions related to each developmental stage are as follows.

**Storming**

Every individual selected for committee membership comes to the table carrying his or her own unique history, perspective, and baggage. Such is true even of the most diligent and positive academic citizens. Personality, value, and visioning differences will always exist. The challenge in the storming stage centers upon the transitioning of negative experiences into a positive cooperation and mutual respect essentially necessary for the development of a common vision and purpose. Several strategies guided the QEP committee through initial storming.

Ignoring negative perceptions does little to transition an individual’s perspective. Such may even create a more negative perception stemming from the denial of past experiences. Few, if any institutions of higher education, lack numerous examples of well-intended projects reduced to meaningless reports weighing down shelves and cluttering up what would otherwise be useful office space. Even the most engaged QEP committee possesses knowledge of and experience with failed strategies for improvement. Transition of negative perceptions can occur based upon the adoption of a common
consent to ensure that the QEP is more than just another failed effort.

The TAMUC QEP process began with the committee’s identification of past failures and current barriers to success. Committee members voiced individual concerns. Acknowledgement of these concerns served to transition the committee towards a more meaningful approach to enhancing student learning. Three major concerns rose to the forefront: administrative commitment, administrative follow-through, and a prevalent negative point of view concerning accreditation issues.

Administrative commitment to the QEP process constituted an immediate focus. The committee members neither desired participation on another meaningless committee nor involvement in any administrative task destined only to clutter valuable office space. Verbal administrative commitment was easily forthcoming however; verbal assurance did little to assuage faculty concern. The real issue of administrative commitment centered on budgetary commitment. The possibility of a stipend or instructional release time for committee membership did not engender acceptance of administrative commitment. The wisdom of an experienced Provost carried the day for this QEP committee. The actual delivery of professional development opportunities, needed equipment, and staff support convinced the committee of the seriousness of administrative commitment.

TAMUC has long suffered through high levels of administrative and faculty turnover. This rapid turnover in personnel created apprehension and distrust for any new program for the enhancement of instructional quality. The QEP committee observed that many processes had not been carried to fruition because of changes in key personnel. Equally alarming was the university’s journey towards the acquisition of a new president, and the looming concern that he or she might scrap the entire QEP process and begin afresh. The QEP committee finally arrived at the conclusion that student learning constitutes such an important place in any institution of higher education that even failed attempts contain merit and are worthy of pursuit.

Concerns related to the negative perception of activities simply to maintain SACS compliance also surfaced. “To SACS or not to SACS,” that was the question. Extensive discussion occurred before arriving at an acceptable position. Certainly compliance with accreditation standards drove the development and initiation of the QEP; however, a much more important rationale existed. TAMUC students deserve the finest education that the university could deliver. They deserve no less than the best efforts of the faculty and staff geared toward producing a high quality educational experience. The committee adopted this position and decided to put forth their best effort for their students.

The identification of institutional barriers easily transitioned into strategies for successful implementation of the QEP. Personal differences were more difficult to address. Every committee includes members who do not necessarily appreciate or even like each other. The process of “storming” often brings out the worst in these situations. As the QEP committee discussed and formulated an identification of institutional barriers, members began to bond towards a common goal. Franklin’s observation during the American Revolution quickly became the common outlook, “We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.” This sort of bonding required time and was nurtured in the adoption of a common purpose. Adequate time was allotted for the committee membership to move through the storming phase by providing an early start with adequate opportunity to work through issues, concerns, and personalities.

Forming
Four aspects of visioning guided the QEP committee through the forming stage: mission statement, philosophy, operational guidelines, and management style. Though formulation of visioning may easily be viewed as a linear model, the actual solidification of a common vision is anything but linear in nature. Each aspect impacted the other until a final product emerged to guide the QEP committee.

The QEP committee quickly arrived at the conclusion that educators tend to measure that which is easily measured in place of measuring those elements which are valued. The committee vowed to seek a different path by emphasizing the value of student learning as the central purpose of the university. Formation of the value laden mission statement led to the development of an operational philosophy. The operational philosophy of the committee emphasized the importance of a faculty-driven process, a formative structure, risk-free environment, and information driven approach. The mission statement and operational guidelines are contained in Appendix A.

Faculty involvement is always contingent upon faculty buy-in, and faculty buy-in is contingent upon faculty involvement. The two cannot be separated or ignored. Though many models exist to solicit faculty involvement and buy-in, the QEP committee adopted a process completely dependent upon the inclusion and utilization of faculty expertise. Faculty participation was sought through the adoption of a formative approach and development of a risk-free environment. The committee acknowledged that meaningful examination of assessment for improvement is formulated upon open acceptance of failure without assignment of blame. Faculty participation must be without the risk of reprisal, retaliation, or any other negative consequences associated with employment. Meaningful assessment methodologies for student learning objectives also demanded acceptance for the possibility of failure. Information guiding the decision making process needed to be open and widely disseminated. The QEP committee embraced the need for a climate of objective analysis of assessment results to guide improvement practices.

Operational guidelines (Appendix A) emerged to guide the committee. The operational guidelines emphasize student learning, enhancement of the university’s reputation, transparency of the QEP process, respect for differences within the university, and the implementation of a user-friendly environment. The intent of the latter guideline specifically targeted the elimination of re-active bureaucratic minutia and provided focused attention on the implementation of proactive methodologies for documenting the QEP process and activities.

The QEP committee also adopted a participatory leadership style to guide through the development, initiation, and assessment of the QEP process. The committee recognized the need for two-way communication essentially necessary for success. Development of the curriculum, instruction, faculty, and university necessitated a mutual dialogue between the committee and the entire constituency associated with the learning environment. Collaborative dialogue became the mantra of the QEP committee.

Norming

Transitioning beyond vision to practice constituted the next layer of the committee’s achievement. The QEP committee established protocols and operational norms when faced with the myriad of complexities associated with the establishment of a culture of evidence and inquiry. These protocols and norms were not formally adopted but became expectations based on established practice. Six
major focus areas emerged from these efforts, i.e. establishment of a committee interaction protocol, modification and guidance of expectations, identification and utilization of resources, creation of and participation in professional development activities, transition of roles, and maintenance of a public persona.

Committee interaction adjusted to encompass both open debates and reconciliation of differences of opinion as a common vision and purpose emerged. Committee co-chairs utilized every means at their disposal to foster an open and transparent process. Clerical staff served to remind members of meetings well in advance and provided reminders one day in advance. The QEP committee maintained a website to communicate relevant information to its members and the community at large. Co-chairs gently moderated debates towards a committee consensus while acknowledging and validating the minority views. On every occasion, the QEP committee decided upon the next course of action with the power to modify any chosen direction. Systematic compliance with wishes of the QEP committee strengthened both communication and mutual trust. Committee co-chairs acted only on the behalf of the committee.

The committee rigorously held to previously established operational guidelines. On numerous occasions different members called the group back to focus on these operational guidelines. Performance expectations easily conformed to either operational guidelines or experienced modifications to established standards. The committee awarded the kiss-of-death to any activity falling outside established parameters. The maintenance of a user-friendly environment rapidly positioned itself as a top priority to rectify the committee’s struggle with unduly bureaucratic methodology. Adherence to this single operational guideline best served to promote the QEP process within the institution as a uniquely new educational approach in quality assessment. For example, the committee required no documentation from focus group members. Instead, transcriptions of recorded meetings replaced individual documentation. Members of focus groups experienced the opportunities to brainstorm, share ideas, and enjoy the process in a painless environment. Word of this approach spread to create goodwill towards the QEP process.

Administrative personnel and the QEP committee collaborated in the identification and utilization of institutional resources. Resources ranged from faculty, staff, and administration to finances, equipment, and external connections. The availability of resources to support the activities of the QEP committee proved essential in the realm of establishing the legitimacy of the committee and associated activities.

The administration provided committee members opportunity to attend major SACS workshops regarding the QEP process and the SACS annual meeting. As expected participation in appropriate professional development activities guided an understanding of a QEP’s essential requirements and also served to enhance committee cooperation. Understanding of a common problem set fostered a common purpose and approach.

Committee co-chairs intentionally modeled participatory leadership and inclusion, therefore transitioning roles became an immediate concern. If the committee expected high-level participation from the university community, the co-chairs had to foster high-level participation within the QEP committee. Committee members gradually transitioned from receptors to practitioners. Two co-chairs quickly yielded to a committee of co-chairs, each of whom was empowered as representatives of the QEP project. Collaboration enabled interaction which in turn enabled learning.
Committee members served as ambassadors of good-will to promote acceptance of and inclusion in the QEP process. Unspoken standards of academic citizenship promoted teamwork within the university. The committee recognized the role perceptions and relationships play in the adoption of new ideas. Co-chairs actively transitioned efforts beyond initial personal agendas and negativity to encompass a holistic vision of the QEP process. The committee’s holistic vision proved contagious. Committee members proved to be effective ambassadors as faculty tended to trust other faculty more than administrators. The inclusion of faculty ambassadors effectively legitimized the QEP process. The wisdom behind the selection of faculty co-chairs certainly became evident at this point.

Staffing requirements also emerged as the QEP emerged. Planners of the QEP process must remember that the process is dynamic in nature. Few possess a crystal ball to discern the future. Even the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry. Staffing resources remained flexible and innovative. Senior administrators proved essential to meeting the staffing needs of the QEP committee. Graduate assistants served as transcriptionists. Clerical staff handled budgetary requests associated with professional development activities and supported other associated requirements for meeting with the QEP committee, focus groups, and a myriad of other events. Administrative staff also pushed committee needs through the university system.

Recommendations

Survival in the arena of QEP leadership requires a vision for the improvement of committee processes and several recommendations come to mind. The importance of faculty leadership cannot be underemphasized. The QEP must produce faculty leaders capable of serving as ambassadors of goodwill. Administrators cannot replace or match the legitimacy afforded members of the faculty, nor should they try. Administrative staff should digress by fading into the background and permitting faculty members to speak for the QEP. The QEP committee should be co-chaired by faculty members and should be primarily composed of faculty members. The QEP committee should speak and operate in a format familiar to faculty members to maximize buy-in and participation. Administrative staff should yield to the expertise of faculty as they speak to their own kind.

Administration must adequately fund and support the QEP committee. Project legitimacy is contingent upon this level of administrative commitment. The university community knows that administration funds that which is valued and does not fund that which is not valued. Use this perception to emphasize the importance of the QEP. Administrative dialogue with the university community is also very important; however, the three most important administrative contributions towards the legitimacy of the QEP remain money, money, and money.

Conclusion

The challenges associated with developing and leading the QEP committee constitute only a small portion of the entire QEP process; however, successful navigation through these steps are critical to each aspect of institutional buy-in, which is so necessary for guiding the QEP to fruition. Mentorship of the QEP committee can be simultaneously challenging and rewarding. Again remember that great QEP committees are not born. Great QEP committees are grown through careful planning, visioning, and evaluation.

References


Appendix A

QEP Committee Standards

Vision Statement

The Quality Enhancement Committee promotes institutional-wide engagement to advance student learning and enhance the quality of TAMU-C graduates. The Committee oversees compliance with Core Requirement 2.12 of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in regard to the Foundations of Quality Enhancement. The Committee adheres to the belief that Quality Enhancement must proceed beyond compliance to provide the best possible learning experience for TAMU-C students and graduates.

Operational Guidelines

The Committee will operate under the following guidelines. All activities will:

1. Focus on Student Learning;

2. Enhance the Academic Reputation of TAMU-C;

3. Maintain Sensitivity to Differences Within the University;

4. Remain Open and Transparent;

5. Promote University-Wide Engagement; AND